The Courier-Journal

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The Two Wars Being Fought In Vietnam

IT IS NOT AT all surprising to hear that our ambassador to South Vietnam, Henry Cabot Lodge, is unhappy over the role of the Central Intelligence Agency there. Ambassador Lodge, a Republican, was asked by President Kennedy to accept a most difficult and frustrating mission; to act as official representative of the United States in a country badly governed, torn by civil war and hostile or seemingly indifferent to our efforts to help.

A man in such a spot must be capable of exercising his best judgment and he must be sure that that judgment will be upheld at home. He does not expect, as certainly Ambassador Lodge did not expect, to find what amounts to three rival embassies, all exercising their best judgment competitively on the spot.

In Major General Harkins, our military chief in Vietnam, Mr. Lodge finds an officer who is convinced he knows, not only the progress of the war there, but the best means of dealing with the troublesome ruling family and the problems of the divided population. The optimism of Secretary McNamara's report on the war, following his recent visit is a reflection of General Harkins's opinions, not of those of Ambassador Lodge.

In C.I.A. Chief John Richardson, Mr. Lodge finds a man whose mission it has been to work closely with the arrogant and troublesome leading family of Vietnam, while at the same time analyzing and appraising the intelligence reports brought in by his subordinates. And here, of course, is where a large part of the recurring trouble that seems to dog the C.I.A. and its undoubtedly able agents must arise.

What exactly is the role of an intelligence agency? Is it simply to gather information and transmit it to other branches of the home government for action? Is it to engage in the active influencing of governments and leaders toward a course of action we deem satisfactory? If this latter role is the true one, and in practice it seems to outweigh in importance the mere gathering of information, who decides on the course of action to be sought and who interprets it to whom?

This is the dilemma of Ambassador Lodge and any other representative of the State Department who finds himself too often instructed to carry out one policy while C.I.A.'s man on the spot is obviously intent on carrying out another. Mr. Lodge's actions since he arrived in Saigon indicate his clear belief that the State Department wants the Nhu family to reform its corrupt government, cease from further dividing the populace with its anti-Buddhist policies and, just possibly, curb the tongue of the waspish Madame Nhu.

But tough talk from the Ambassador is matched by gentle, even evasive action by those who spend the C.I.A.'s funds. And Mr. Lodge's worried and angry reports seem to be contradicted either by the military or the C.I.A. man on the spot.

Divided authority is no way to win the respect of the cynical and opinionated rulers of Vietnam, or of the people they control. The Ambassador is said also to feel that an agency head as close to the Nhu family as the C.I.A.'s Richardson is not in a position to be objective about intelligence he receives from the field, any more than the general who is dedicated to win a difficult and exhausting war is qualified to interpret the political factors bearing on that war.

This is the situation Mr. Kennedy must now sort out, following on Mr. McNamara's report. He has summoned the head of the C.I.A. to Washington, not apparently to scold him, for there is no evidence Richardson has not done exactly what he has been instructed to do, but to try once more to delineate the lines of authority that threaten to become badly tangled.

All of these hypotheses are, of course, just that. The most interested reader can only gather between lines and from reporters he trusts what the likely truth may be. There is no frankness from our government toward the American people who are helping fight this war. There is determined secrecy and even hostility in Vietnam toward American reporters who are trying to keep us informed. But it is impossible for the sensible observer to believe cheerful communiques and reassuring prophecies when, in addition to urging the Vietnamese to fight a war against Communist domination, our authorities on the spot must fight their own little war of divided authority and diverging policies.

If the President can decide once and for all who is in the saddle in this and other such outposts, and make the chain of authority plain to all, he may do more than any army can do to pacify Vietnam and give it a will to win its war.

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